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Point de Vue

Rural Development Group Politics: A Hidden Cost?

Ruth McAreavey

In this article I argue for an unravelling and a better understanding of the role of micro-politics as a means of enhancing the performance of European rural development groups.

The role and importance of rural development groups in the implementation of European rural policy is significant. The LEADER approach, which provides funding for local action groups in rural communities, has been adopted as a separate axis within the new European Rural Development Regulation (European Commission, 2004). This regulation requires a minimum of 7 per cent of programme expenditure to be dedicated to the LEADER approach with the presumption that local action groups should have the main role in implementing wider rural spending. Increasingly, other legislation, such as the Water Framework and Nitrates Directives, is requiring the formation of partnerships as it seeks to involve stakeholders in the implementation process. Rural development groups, therefore, are central in the implementation of European rural and environmental policies.

It is critical that community groups operate effectively. Their inability to do this through negotiation, making deals and resolving conflicts can lead to frustration within the community and beyond (Taylor, 2003). As a result of these shortcomings, Taylor found that people from the community and voluntary sector 'felt that the real decisions were made elsewhere and that they were involved in the micro-politics' (Taylor, 2003:191). The ramifications of being side-tracked by these internal group processes can be time consuming for groups but they have more serious implications. Such group disputes and tensions may hamper the effectiveness of the group and result in communities 'fighting the wrong battles' (Taylor, 2003:192). Hence by focusing on micro-politics groups fail to engage with the issues that brought a group of individuals together in the first place. This may mean a loss of input to more strategic decision-making processes.

Micro-politics! So what?

The importance of micro-politics and internal processes to the ultimate success of a group may appear so obvious that readers may wonder if this topic even merits attention by *EuroChoices*. And yet the complexities of managing group processes continue to challenge rural development practice in Europe, with organizations devoting key resources to the subject and private consultancy firms earning vital revenue as a result of this difficulty. Before rural development

groups are able to move beyond 'mere micro-politics' to focus on more strategic matters, micro-politics needs to be unraveled and better understood. This is the purpose of the remainder of this article. By flagging up the importance of micro-politics it is hoped that rural development decision makers will be in a better position to get on with the job in hand; that is the implementation of rural policy.

This discussion is based on empirical research that was conducted over a three-year period by the author while employed by a Housing Association to co-ordinate a rural development and regeneration project, sponsored in the main by two UK Government agencies. The project sought to demonstrate the contribution of housing associations to sustainable, holistic development and to identify successful regeneration practice (McAreavey, 2003). The *process* of rural development formed a key focus of the research. The findings of this research are not just applicable within the geographic area studied; they have relevance to the broader rural development and regeneration sector.

What is micro-politics?

Micro-politics can be defined as the intangible processes and norms occurring within a group as a result of the interaction of a set of individuals working together (McAreavey, 2006). These interactions reveal similarities to game theory because of the impact of peoples' behaviour on the well-being of other individuals within the group. They encompass intangible components that are necessary for a group to function effectively, but which can also result in ineffective and inefficient activity. Micro-politics involves knowledge, power, trust, perceptions, understanding, social networks, values and traits that arise as a result of individuals interacting within a group whilst working on a shared goal, such as rural development. Successful groups rely on positive micro-politics. That is they rely on individuals interacting in a way that achieves a greater social good. This social good relates to the purpose that brought them together in the first place, be it the creation of micro-businesses in a local community or the establishment of community IT facilities. Interactions are therefore dependent on (personal) preferences, perceptions of others' preferences and opinions on what rural development is about.

Experiencing micro-politics

In one community within the research area group spats and personality clashes prevented a regeneration group from agreeing on objectives and priorities. The partners were so busy disagreeing and revisiting old disputes that the partnership missed a funding deadline for economic development activities. None of the projects were selected for funding, no-one within the group had recognized the need to co-operate and act in a collective way for the greater good of their community. In fact relations had deteriorated so much that an external facilitator was

employed to spend several days engaging the group in a community planning exercise while also fostering a new culture of trust among partners.

Trust lies at the very heart of micro-politics and it is a two-way process. In the above example, however, everyone acted in purely selfish terms, not cooperatively; there was no attempt to act in a strategic way that ensured ultimate group success - an illustration of the so-called 'prisoner's dilemma' which is typified by lack of mutual trust. The result was inferior outcomes for all.

An alternative approach - and one that encouraged co-operation - was observed in efforts actively to stimulate a culture of mutual trust. The engendering of positive relations was achieved in a community group through holding informal sessions with refreshments prior to formal Board meetings. In this way individuals were given the opportunity to interact and those who were less familiar with the formality of a business meeting were put at their ease. This group was thriving and healthy and members enjoyed the development of meaningful inter-personal relationships. Consequently business meetings gave systematic consideration to a range of options, before taking an informed decision that was in the interest of the wider community.

Players may decide to opt out of the rural development 'game'. The Chair of a regeneration group within the research area was also a district councillor, chair of the local housing improvement group and was a member of a tenant liaison group. Other members had multiple functions within the community. The group was perceived by many as being elitist and council driven, having nothing to do with the local community and so they had no desire to get involved (McAreavey, 2006). The very legitimacy of the regeneration group was questioned. Even if a group seeks out individuals that are not involved with existing organisations there is a danger that they subsequently become empowered, boosting the local elite (Edwards *et al*, 2001). Hence in area-based community development those who hold power are often made more powerful as poorer groups remain socially excluded (Shortall and Shucksmith, 2001). In taking action and making decisions the rural development practitioner must consider not only the actual membership of the group but also the preferences of 'others' who may not have a voice around the table.

Managing micro-politics

In reality groups are inevitably caught up with processes associated with individual interaction; these are a vital part of rural development, often making or breaking the development process. People may remain involved because they enjoy the positive social interaction and the achievement of other goals. However, individuals can also become disillusioned with rural development because of negative consequences such as personality clashes, abuses of

individual power or the perceived lack of group legitimacy. One form of escape from this type of deadlock would be to link group activity to vertical governance structures, such as that of regional government, thereby affording legitimacy while simultaneously attempting to overcome the inadequacies arising from negative micro-politics. But this would undermine the very *raison d'être* for the LEADER process, as articulated by the EU Commission i.e. the empowerment of local action groups. A more apposite approach is to recognize the significance of micro-politics to the rural development process; and then to take steps to nurture a culture of mutual trust to ensure that rural development actors co-operate rather than play destructive games with one another. This seems particularly important for the future given the importance ascribed to stakeholder involvement in, for example, the Water Framework Directive.

Understanding the elusive social processes, positive and negative, that are the micro-politics of rural development are crucial for successful practice. The monetary and time costs to a community of failing to address micro-politics and nurture positive group relations are considerable. These include time spent in unproductive meetings and poorly compiled - and ultimately unsuccessful - funding applications as a result of failure to agree priorities. Ultimately a disregard for micro-politics will result in ineffective local action, leading potentially to the risky policy option of reducing or bypassing completely local power structures, for example through a reduction in resources for the LEADER approach. The role micro-politics can play in the success of rural regeneration projects needs careful attention and management by policymakers and practitioners alike.

Further Reading

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Summary [Please rewrite, carefully reflecting the amended article, as close as possible to 200 words - the summary is important in *EuroChoices*]

In this article I argue for an unravelling and a better understanding of the role of micro-politics as a means of enhancing the performance of European rural development groups. As rural development groups are central in the implementation of European rural and environmental policies, it is imperative that they operate effectively. I discuss how unsuccessful groups are often so preoccupied with internal group processes or 'micro-politics' that they lose opportunities to participate in strategic decision-making processes and to access vital funding monies. Meanwhile successful groups enjoy the benefit of positive micro-politics such as trust, positive social networks and social benefits while also achieving their over-arching objectives. 'Micro-politics' must be understood and unravelled before groups are able to make meaningful progress. This involves active management to nurture a culture of mutual trust to ensure that rural development actors co-operate rather than play destructive games with one another. This seems particularly important for the future given the importance ascribed to stakeholder involvement in, for example, the Water Framework Directive. It is concluded that given this policy context, the role of micro-politics merits the attention of policymakers and rural regeneration practitioners alike.

Pullquote [about two lines]

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